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100 Duke & Young Streets, Kingston, Georgetown, Guyana**

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**OP-ED by Ambassador D. Brent Hardt  
International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women Celebrates 100 Years**

As we once again take up the "16 Days of Activism against Gender Violence," commencing on November 25 with the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women and ending December 10 with International Human Rights Day, we must answer the call to free women from violence.

Violence against women and girls touches Guyana just as it does every other nation. One in three women around the world will experience some form of gender-based violence in her lifetime. In some countries that number is as high as 70 percent. Gender-based violence is a global pandemic that cuts across all borders -- ethnicity, race, socio-economic status, and religion. It can threaten women and girls at any point in their lives, from female feticide and inadequate access to education and nutrition to child marriage, incest, and so-called "honor" killings. It can take the form of dowry-related murder or domestic violence, rape (including spousal rape), sexual exploitation and abuse, trafficking in persons, or the neglect and ostracism of widows.

Gender-based violence is not just an affront to human rights and dignity – it adversely impacts the welfare of our communities. When women and girls are abused, businesses close, incomes shrink, families go hungry, and children grow up internalizing behavior that perpetuates the cycle of violence. There is no end to the economic and detrimental social and health costs that come along with this brutality. Consider the costs incurred for substantial medical and legal services as a result of injury and abuse. Or calculate the costs of lost household productivity and reduced income stemming from the forfeit of paid working days. As many women often work in "the informal economy" selling market goods or working as domestics, such costs are often hidden - even in plain sight. This damage is passed on to the rest of the community as judicial, health and security services are strained.

Violence effectively acts as a cancer on societies, causing enormous upheaval in the progress of social and economic development. Physical violence vastly increases women's risk for a range of serious conditions, including reproductive health problems, miscarriages and sexually transmitted diseases, such as HIV. There are also strong linkages to maternal mortality, as well as poor child health and morbidity.

Beyond the individual pain and suffering, gender-based violence has a range of economic effects at the national level, such as foregone foreign investment and reduced confidence in a given country's institutions. No country or part of the world is immune to these costs. In the United States, the cost of violence against women exceeds \$5.8 billion per year, with \$4.1 billion spent on direct medical and health care services, and productivity losses accounting for another \$1.8 billion. Clearly, investing in the prevention and prosecution of acts of aggression against women will pay enormous dividends in the long run. The United States' Violence Against Women Act, which strengthened efforts to investigate and prosecute such crimes, has been estimated to have saved more than \$16 billion since its enactment in 1994.

Based on the cases reported in the media and the prevalence of the risk factors associated with violence, it is evident that the incidence of violence against women in Guyana is far too high. There have been visible efforts by both the Government and civil society organizations to address the problem, by enhancing public awareness, enacting legislation such as the Domestic Violence Act and the Sexual Offences Act; establishing the Men's Affairs Bureau and the Domestic Violence Policy Unit; and providing support services for victims of violence. Cooperation between Guyana and the United States has been strong, but overcoming the issue of gender-based violence remains a challenge.

That is why I was pleased to have the opportunity to participate in a forum on November 17 co-sponsored by the Women and Gender Equality Commission (W&GEC) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to recognize and raise awareness for the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. This forum, attended by over 100 civil society representatives, provided a chance for men and women to explore ways to work together to combat the scourge of gender-based violence. Gender-based violence cannot be treated as solely a women's issue, and this forum rightly recognized that men and boys must be part of the solution to preventing violence and changing gender attitudes.

The United States is committed to continuing our efforts together. All countries need to stand up to the impunity that too often leaves the most egregious perpetrators unaccountable for their crimes. We need to redress the low status of women and girls around the world that renders them undervalued and vulnerable. Further, we need to increase accountability and commitment by community and government leaders on this issue, and highlight and promote programs that work.

This is a profound challenge for the entire world – countries cannot progress when half their populations are marginalized, mistreated, and subjected to discrimination. As Secretary Clinton recently noted, "Investing in the potential of the world's women and girls is one of the surest ways to achieve global economic progress, political stability, and greater prosperity for women – and men - the world over." When women and girls are accorded their rights and afforded equal opportunities in education, healthcare, employment, and political participation, they lift up their families, their communities, and their nations – and can act as agents of change.